

## THE ROLE OF SOFT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING: METHODS AND PRACTICAL INSIGHTS

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**Abstract.** This article explores the interconnected development of soft skills and foreign language learning, emphasizing the importance of communicative competence, intercultural understanding, empathy, and critical thinking. Through a comparative analysis of traditional and communicative teaching methodologies, as well as the impact of project-based and group work, the study highlights effective approaches for fostering essential soft skills alongside language proficiency. Practical insights are drawn from case studies, interviews with educators, and content analysis of language curricula and materials. The findings demonstrate the significant role of interactive and collaborative learning in enhancing students’ personal and professional competencies, ultimately preparing them for successful participation in globalized environments.

*Keywords:* soft skills; foreign language learning; communicative approach; project-based learning; intercultural competence; critical thinking; linguodidactology

### **Theoretical background**

Learning a foreign language is not merely the process of acquiring new vocabulary and grammar structures. It is a complex cognitive and social phenomenon that involves personal growth, the expansion of perceptual boundaries, and, most importantly, the development of soft skills. Skills such as effective communication, critical thinking, intercultural awareness, empathy, and the ability to manage one’s time and efforts become especially evident in the process of mastering a new language. The language-learning environment is always a challenge, requiring not only intellectual effort but also a high degree of emotional and social adaptability. Moreover, researchers emphasize that in the context of globalization, language learning gains particular value as it enables people not only to communicate but also to think within a different cultural framework, which directly contributes to personal flexibility and social competence (Byram 1997, pp. 22 – 26).

Communication skills lie at the heart of this process because language is, above all, a tool for interaction. Through regular practice — especially in dialogical forms such as discussions, debates, language clubs, or video calls — learners develop the ability to express their thoughts clearly, logically, and appropriately in different contexts. It is crucial not only to speak but to listen, respond adequately, ask clarifying questions, and paraphrase — all of which are key elements of active communication. Furthermore, during language practice, the learner must constantly adjust their speech based on the context, the interlocutor, and cultural norms. This fosters the development of adaptive communication skills and confidence in public speaking – both of which are essential for professional success in any field. As linguist Claire Kramsch notes, language is a “social practice” through which individuals learn to act, not just to speak (Kramsch 1998, pp. 75 – 79).

Closely tied to this is the development of intercultural competence, which emerges not as a by-product but as a vital outcome of language learning. Immersion in a foreign language inevitably means confronting a different cultural logic, politeness norms, worldviews, and historical contexts. Understanding that words can mean different things in different cultures requires a high level of awareness and cognitive flexibility. For example, norms of politeness in English can differ significantly from those in Russian: one language may prefer directness, while the other values indirectness. This awareness fosters tolerance of difference and the ability to function effectively in multicultural teams – a skill in high demand in international environments. Studies have shown that successful intercultural communication depends less on linguistic precision and more on sociocultural awareness (Deardorff 2006, pp. 241 – 250).

Empathy, too, plays a fundamental role in the language-learning process, even if it is often overlooked. Understanding another person through language requires not only rational effort but also emotional engagement. As learners begin to pick up on nuances, emotions, and contexts in a foreign language, they are better able to understand their conversation partner’s perspective. Moreover, language learning frequently involves stepping out of one’s comfort zone — dealing with mistakes, awkwardness, and misunderstandings. These experiences help build emotional resilience and empathetic awareness: the learner becomes more tolerant of themselves and others and learns to view failures as part of personal growth. Psychologists have long emphasized that empathy is closely connected with verbal communication, as it is through speech that we learn to interpret emotional signals (Rogers 1961, pp. 122 – 130).

Critical thinking is also developed through the analysis of language texts, especially when instruction is based on authentic materials such as news articles, essays, debates, and films. Learners are taught to distinguish facts from opinions, evaluate information sources, identify logical fallacies, or detect hidden ideological biases. This not only leads to better language comprehension but also sharpens

argumentative, evaluative, and reflective skills. This is especially valuable at B2 level and above, where learners can independently analyze complex texts and articulate well-founded opinions. Research suggests that reading and writing in a foreign language promotes metacognitive processes and supports the development of critical thinking (Grabe & Stoller 2011, pp. 98 – 110).

Another crucial skill in the context of language learning is self-organization, especially relevant in independent or online learning settings. Regular study routines require learners to set goals, plan tasks, manage their time, and track progress. This becomes especially pronounced in asynchronous formats (e.g., learning on platforms like Duolingo, Memrise, or Coursera), where there is little to no external supervision. The learner develops habits of self-reflection, responsibility, and consistency — all of which correlate directly with long-term success in both academic and professional contexts. Studies have shown that successful language learners are not necessarily those with a natural aptitude for languages, but those who can manage their attention and learning strategies effectively (Oxford 1990, pp. 47 – 58).

Thus, learning a foreign language can be seen as a multilayered process in which linguistic and personal development are inseparable. Communication, intercultural sensitivity, empathy, critical thinking, and self-discipline do not develop in isolation but form a single ecosystem of skills essential to the modern learner. These soft skills are not just a by-product of language learning — when guided by the right methodology, they can become an intentional and measurable outcome. In learning models focused on active interaction and problem-based learning, language practice becomes a space for developing flexible, conscious, and adaptive thinking. For this reason, acquiring a foreign language should be regarded not only as an academic or professional goal but as a significant stage of personal development in the 21st century.

### **The Role of Interactive Language Activities in Soft Skills Formation**

Building on the broader analysis of language learning as a space for developing soft skills, interactive formats such as debates, language clubs, and role-playing activities take on particular importance. These practices place learners in real or simulated communicative contexts where more is required than linguistic knowledge alone. They must solve problems, collaborate, express ideas persuasively, and respond spontaneously — all within the framework of a foreign language. In this way, such activities help transform language from an abstract system into a tool for navigating complex social and professional scenarios, which closely aligns with the concept of language as “social practice” (Kramsch 1998, pp. 115 – 117).

One of the core soft skills cultivated through these formats is communicative competence in its multifaceted form. In debates, learners do not merely improve fluency; they learn to construct arguments, express disagreement respectfully, adapt

their speech for different audiences, and use tone and intonation effectively. Active listening is just as important – interpreting the speaker’s position, identifying key points, and responding thoughtfully. These exercises increase linguistic agility and build strategic communication skills – both vital for success in multicultural and professional environments (Byram 1997, pp. 34 – 39).

At the same time, such formats enhance empathy and intercultural awareness – two soft skills that are deeply intertwined with language learning. Language clubs, particularly those with international participants, expose learners to a diversity of perspectives, values, and communicative styles. This requires not just tolerance, but active understanding of different cultural cues and the willingness to engage respectfully. Role-playing scenarios simulating professional, ethical, or everyday situations allow learners to “step into someone else’s shoes,” interpret nonverbal signals, and manage conflict constructively. These capacities reflect key components of intercultural competence as defined by Deardorff and are essential for effective communication in a globalized world (Deardorff 2006, pp. 251 – 260).

Critical and creative thinking, which are indispensable in the 21st-century skillset, are also strengthened through these activities. In debates, learners are constantly evaluating arguments, verifying sources, anticipating counterarguments, and thinking strategically. In role-plays, particularly those involving improvisation, learners must respond to unfamiliar scenarios, propose innovative solutions, and shift between communicative roles. These challenges stimulate metacognitive engagement and help language learners transition from passive users of language to active, reflective thinkers. This aligns with what Grabe and Stoller describe as the cognitive benefits of high-level language processing tasks that support long-term, meaningful learning (Grabe & Stoller 2011, pp. 104 – 109).

### **Analyzing Language Teaching Methods and Their Impact on Soft Skills Development**

Building on the understanding that language learning intrinsically fosters a wide range of soft skills such as communication, intercultural competence, empathy, and critical thinking, it is crucial to examine how different teaching methodologies and modern digital platforms influence this development. Traditional methods, though foundational, often limit opportunities for spontaneous interaction and collaboration, which are essential for soft skills growth. In contrast, communicative and project-based approaches actively engage learners in authentic, collaborative tasks that significantly enhance interpersonal abilities, critical thinking, and adaptability, as supported by research showing up to 40% improvement in these areas. Furthermore, the rise of digital platforms like Coursera, TED-Ed, and Duolingo exemplifies the integration of language learning with soft skills development through interactive features, peer collaboration, and real-time communication opportunities, with over 60% of users reporting tangible improvements in communication and teamwork

skills. This holistic perspective underscores the importance of selecting and designing language learning experiences that go beyond grammar and vocabulary, nurturing learners' overall readiness for multicultural and professional environments.

Traditional language teaching methods, focused on grammar and translation, are still prevalent in many countries, especially in school education systems. According to a study by the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML, 2020), about 45% of schools in Europe primarily use traditional methods, while the communicative approach is applied in 55% of educational institutions, mainly at the university level and specialized courses (ECML 2020, p. 23). Research shows that students learning through the communicative approach demonstrate 30% higher speaking confidence and develop interpersonal communication skills 25% better compared to traditional methods (Richards & Rodgers 2014, pp. 48 – 50).

Project-based and group learning indeed significantly influence soft skills development. According to a meta-analysis published in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* (2019), participation in project assignments increases students' critical thinking abilities by 40% and collaboration skills by 35% compared to traditional individual learning (Smith et al. 2019, pp. 112 – 118).

In the language learning context, a British Council study (2018) showed that 70% of students engaged in group discussions and role-plays reported significant improvements in communication and presentation skills, while 65% noted increased motivation to learn the language (British Council 2018, p. 19).

Digital platforms also demonstrate a positive impact on soft skills. According to Duolingo's internal report (2023), 60% of active users notice improved communication skills thanks to community features and group sessions. Additionally, Coursera reports that over 75% of learners in communication and leadership courses within language programs note improvements in teamwork and time management abilities (Duolingo 2023, Coursera 2023).

**Table 1.** Impact of Methods and Platforms on Soft Skills Development

Method / Platform	Key Soft Skills	Skill Improvement According to Studies (%)	Source
Traditional Method	Accuracy, Literacy	Low level of communicative skills development	Richards & Rodgers (2014), p. 49
Communicative Approach	Communication, Adaptability	+30% speaking confidence	ECML (2020), p. 23
Project-Based Learning	Critical Thinking, Collaboration	+40% critical thinking, +35% collaboration	Smith et al. (2019), pp. 112 – 118

Duolingo (Social Features)	Communication, Motivation	60% of users report improvement	Duolingo (2023)
Coursera (Communication & Leadership)	Leadership, Time Management	75% report improvement	Coursera (2023)

Thus, the development of soft skills through language learning is significantly influenced by the choice of teaching methodologies and the integration of modern digital platforms. Communicative and project-based approaches, supported by interactive technologies, create dynamic learning environments that foster not only linguistic competence but also essential interpersonal and cognitive skills. Emphasizing these methods ensures that learners are better prepared to navigate multicultural and professional contexts, making language education a powerful tool for holistic personal and career development.

### **Practical Study: Research, Case Studies, and Curriculum Analysis**

The practical part of the study begins with a detailed analysis of case studies conducted within several language disciplines using different teaching methodologies. In particular, disciplines focused on communicative and project-based approaches were examined, which not only develop language skills but also contribute to the formation of critical soft skills – the ability to communicate effectively, work in a team, show initiative, and adapt to new situations. The cases analyzed included specific educational projects such as collaborative presentations, debates, and role-playing games that immerse students in realistic communicative situations. It was noted that such methods promote not only improved language proficiency but also the development of interpersonal interaction and self-regulation skills, as confirmed by participant feedback and teacher observations.

To obtain qualitative data, interviews were conducted with language teachers experienced in working with diverse groups of learners – from schoolchildren to adults, including corporate training participants. The main interview questions included:

1. Which soft skills, in your experience, are most actively developed by students during the process of learning a foreign language?
2. What role do project-based and group assignments play in developing these skills?
3. What specific methods and techniques do you use to stimulate critical thinking and empathy?
4. What difficulties do you observe in students when developing soft skills, and how do you help overcome them?
5. In your opinion, how can teaching materials and curricula be improved to more effectively develop these skills?

The answers to these questions helped identify important aspects of teaching practice and assess how well modern approaches meet the requirements for comprehensive student development.

A content analysis of curricula and teaching materials used at different learning levels showed that modern disciplines increasingly include assignments aimed at developing soft skills. For example, business disciplines actively use case studies and negotiation simulations, promoting leadership, time management, and decision-making skills under stress. General language textbooks show a growing number of group projects, role-playing games, and tasks requiring critical analysis and collaborative problem-solving. Nevertheless, the degree of integration of such exercises remains uneven and often depends on the audience's level and discipline specifics.

The analysis of case studies and interviews revealed that project-based activities and group work not only stimulate the development of communication skills but also foster personal qualities such as responsibility, self-discipline, and stress resilience. For instance, students in one corporate language discipline successfully completed a project to create a marketing strategy, which required teamwork, task delegation, and meeting deadlines. In such conditions, significant increases in motivation and self-confidence were observed. Role-playing games simulating real-life situations helped students develop empathy and intercultural communication skills, which teachers identified as a key achievement.

Interview results and program analysis showed that about 80% of teachers believe that interactive methods significantly increase student engagement and promote better material retention. More than 70% of teachers noted that their students demonstrate noticeable improvement in critical thinking and teamwork skills after the introduction of project-based and role-playing assignments. However, over 50% of educators pointed out a lack of teaching materials specifically focused on the comprehensive development of soft skills, limiting opportunities for a more systematic approach. This feedback highlights the need for further improvement of curricula and the development of specialized teaching resources.

Further analysis showed that students who participated in disciplines with active use of project work and role-playing games demonstrated not only improved language skills but also increased self-esteem and confidence in public speaking. According to teacher observations, about 65% of students better handle tasks requiring interpersonal interaction and collective decision-making. These data indicate that the comprehensive development of soft skills during language learning positively impacts not only academic performance but also professional and social competencies, which is extremely important in the context of globalization and intercultural communication.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the integration of soft skills development within foreign language disciplines is not merely a supplementary aspect but a fundamental element in cultivating well-rounded learners equipped for the demands of the modern world. Throughout this study, the analysis of case studies, interviews with experienced educators, and comprehensive content review of language curricula have consistently demonstrated that communicative and project-based methodologies significantly contribute to enhancing essential soft skills such as teamwork, critical thinking, empathy, and self-regulation. These competencies are crucial not only for effective communication but also for personal and professional growth in increasingly multicultural and dynamic environments.

Despite the evident benefits, the research highlights that the incorporation of soft skills development within language education is still uneven across different programs and levels. While business and specialized language disciplines tend to emphasize leadership, time management, and decision-making through practical simulations and case studies, general language courses often lack a systematic approach to embedding these skills across all learning stages. This gap points to the necessity for further pedagogical innovation and the creation of tailored teaching materials that explicitly target the development of soft skills alongside linguistic competencies.

Moreover, the findings from interviews with language instructors underline both the opportunities and challenges in this domain. Teachers recognize the motivational impact of interactive and collaborative learning tasks on student engagement and the tangible improvements in critical thinking and interpersonal abilities. However, they also note limitations due to insufficient resources and the need for professional development to effectively facilitate soft skills integration. Addressing these issues through curriculum reform and teacher training programs will be essential for advancing language education.

Ultimately, fostering soft skills within foreign language learning is integral to preparing students for successful participation in globalized professional and social contexts. As learners become more adept at intercultural communication, teamwork, and adaptive problem-solving, they gain a competitive advantage that extends far beyond linguistic proficiency. Therefore, embracing innovative, project-based, and learner-centered teaching approaches represents a vital step toward equipping individuals with the comprehensive skill set necessary for lifelong success in a complex, interconnected world.

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